

Three Levels of Faith:
Islam, Eiman, and I'hsan

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Text of the Prophet's 'Hadith (saying) about the subject:

On the authority of Omar¹ (may Allah be pleased with him), who said: *One day while we were sitting with the Messenger of Allah (i.e. Prophet Muhammed, pbbuh), there appeared before us a man whose clothes were exceedingly white and whose hair was exceedingly black; no signs of journeying were to be seen on him and none of us knew him. He walked up and sat down by the Prophet (pbbuh). Resting his knees against his (the Prophet's) and placing the palms of his hands on his thighs, he said:

O Muhammed, tell me about **Islam**.

The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: Islam is to testify that there is no god but Allah and Muhammed is the Messenger of Allah, to perform the prayers, to pay the Zakat² to fast in Ramadhan, and to make the pilgrimage to the House³ if you are able to do so.

He said: You have spoken rightly, and we were amazed at him asking him (the Prophet pbbuh) and saying that he had spoken rightly (told the truth).

He said: Then, tell me about **Iman**.⁴

He (the Prophet) said: It is to believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, the Last Day, and to believe in God's precise measurement and His just decrees on everything, including (what maybe perceived as) good or evil.

He said: You have spoken rightly (told the truth).

He said: Then, tell me about **I'hsan**.⁵

He (the Prophet pbbuh) said: It is to worship Allah as if you are seeing him, and while you see Him not yet truly He sees you.

He said: Then, tell me about the **hour**.⁶

He (the Prophet pbbuh) said: The one questioned about it knows no better than the questioner.

He said: Then, tell me about **its signs**.

He (the Prophet pbbuh) said: That the slave-girl will give birth to her mistress, and that you will see the barefooted, naked, destitute herdsmen competing in constructing lofty buildings.⁷

Then, he took himself off and I stayed for some time. Then he (the Prophet pbbuh) said: O Omer, do you know who the questioner was? I said: Allah and His Messenger know better. He said: It was Jibril (Gabriel), who came to you to teach you your religion.

The Messenger of Allah (pbbuh) told the truth (This Hadith was related by Muslim).

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

Introduction

One day, the Angel Jibril, peace be to him, appeared as a man to the Messenger of Allah, Muhammed, peace and blessings be upon him (pbbuh), and his companions in the mosque in Medina. The encounter became as a very well-known 'Hadith (narration or saying), narrated by the Second Caliph, Omar, may Allah be pleased with him.

Jibril asked the Messenger of Allah five questions about the meaning of Islam, Eiman, I'hsan, the Hour, and the Hour signs. As the Messenger of Allah answered each question, Jibril complimented him saying that he told the truth. When Jibril left, the Messenger of Allah told his companion, who did not know the man, that he was Jibril who came to teach them their religion.

This 'Hadith (below) not only summarized the major principles of religion, but it also attracted our attention to the three levels of faith: Islam, Eiman, and I'hsan, which is the focus of this article.

Islam:

Thus, according to the above-mentioned Hadith, there are three levels of faith a person can attain. The first level is **Islam**. Prophet Muhammed (pbbuh) explained it as observing the five major ways of worship ('Ibadat) or duties (the adhering to which creates an Islamic structure, as these duties constitute the pillars of Islam's structure).

It follows that to be a **Muslim**, a person has to proclaim that there is no other god but Allah (praise to Him) and that Muhammed (pbbuh) is His Messenger. The importance of this **proclamation of faith** is that a person acknowledges the existence of Allah (God), praise to Him, as the Creator of the Universe, and that Muhammed (pbbuh) is the Messenger of God. This means that a person accepts the message of God revealed to humanity through Prophet Muhammed (pbbuh), as expressed in the Word of God (the Holy Qur'an) and the Sunna of the Prophet (his sayings, actions, and what he approved of).

Once a person pronounces the Islamic proclamation, then he/she proceeds to observe the Islamic obligations, namely to perform the five daily prayers, pay the annual Zakat (charity), fast during the month of Ramadhan, and make the pilgrimage to the House of Allah in Makkah, if he/she is capable to do so physically and financially (for more details about these obligations, see [Islam: A Brief Introduction](#)).

It is important to note that these are ways of worshipping Allah, 'Ibadat, as He wanted and commanded Muslims to do. He promised to reward those who worship Him and to punish those who don't do that on purpose.

In analyzing these Islamic ways of worshipping God, one discovers that all of them benefit the worshipper directly and his/her society in this life, then they are rewarded with Paradise in the hereafter.

By performing **prayers**, a Muslim has to clean himself/herself through wudu', by washing the mouth, nose, face hands, arms, ears, hair, and feet, every time before prayers. Muslims also have to take showers after sexual intercourse and must keep their clothes clean.

By praying five times a day in specific times, Muslims live in orderly fashion, budgeting their time, and literally exercising five times a day, doing certain movements that range between standing, bowing down, prostrating, and sitting down on the floor. These unique movements exercise various body organs and push more blood to certain areas of the body, like the brain through bowing and prostrating.

By paying the **Zakat**, a Muslim assists the poor and contributes to the well-being of society. It is, at least, 2.5 percent of a person's annual savings. When properly given, the poor will not be left alone in society. It is a systematic expression of compassion and social solidarity. The Zakat does not replace charity or government taxes. However, it contributes to the welfare and well-being of society in areas not covered by government-funded projects.

Fasting the month of **Ramadhan** by abstaining from food, drinks, and sexual activity from dawn to the sunset has tremendous benefits for the body and the soul of a worshipper. Fasting strengthens the control of the self over the body. It allows the rich to feel the suffering of the hungry poor and prompts them to share food with them when they break the fast at the sunset. By eating moderately at the breakfast, many people lose weight, get rid of the accumulated fats throughout the year. Most importantly is giving a break to the digestive system, after eleven months of continuous hard work.

Finally, **Haj, pilgrimage** to the House of God in Makkah, is the climax of being a Muslim. It is a personal journey for God first but it gives great satisfaction to the Haaj (pilgrim), as he/she leaves everything in this life behind. The pilgrimage to Makkah is also a worldwide conference of Muslims, where they meet there representing all nations, racial groups, and ethnic divisions. They are instructed by God to be loving, caring, and tolerant of each other, as well as praising God for His limitless benefits and bounties they have been enjoying.

Eiman:

By being a Muslim, as explained above, a person is promised God's rewards in this life and in the hereafter. Properly practiced, the Islamic ways of worship are beneficial to Muslims as individuals and as communities. However, for those who are more ambitious to be closer to God, to gain a higher level of his rewards, and to enjoy more intellectual happiness, they need to reach a higher level of faith than Islam, which is Eiman, as we are told by Verse 14 of Surat Al-'Hujurat (Chapter 49) of the Holy Quran:.

The A'arab said, "We have believed." Say: "You have not believed," but say "We have submitted," for faith has not yet entered your hearts (Al-'Hujurat, 49: 14).

In this Verse, the A'arab (desert dwellers) said, "We have believed." They meant to say: "We have reached the level of Eiman." But Allah, praise to Him, told His Messenger to tell them that they have not believed yet. That's why they instead should say: 'We have submitted (to Allah by becoming Muslims) because the second level of faith (Eiman) has not yet entered their hearts.

So, what is that second level of faith (Eiman)?

Eiman is to believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, as we read in Verse 136 of Surat Al-Nissa (Chapter 4) of the Holy Quran:

O You who have believed, believe in Allah and His Messenger, (in) the Book that He sent down upon His Messenger, and the Scripture which He sent down before. And whoever disbelieves in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day has certainly gone far astray (Al-Nissa, 4: 136).

Eiman is also the belief in God's precise measurement and His just decrees on everything, as we learn from the 'Hadith of the Messenger of Allah, pbuh, which is mentioned fully below:.

He (Jibril, peace be to him) said: Then, tell me about Eiman.

He (the Prophet, pbuh) said:

It is to believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, the Last Day, and to believe in God's precise measurement and His just decrees on everything, including (what maybe perceived as) good or evil.

Thus, the second level of faith (Eiman) is more of an intellectual nature than the first level of faith (Islam), where a person is saved by worshipping God through actions, that is through performing the five obligations mentioned above.

To reach the second level of faith, Eiman, deeper degrees of knowledge and acknowledgement are required. This includes a belief in Allah (God) and what He said. He informed us in His Book, the Holy Qur'an, that He has angels, He sent previous Books to humanity, delivered through previous messengers.

Thus, a person reaching Eiman (a **Mumen**) believes that not only Allah (God) exists but He, praise to Him, is capable of doing anything He wants. A Mumen believes in everything God told in the Holy Qur'an. He/she believes that there are other intelligent creations of God than human beings, particularly angels. Among these are Jibril (Gabriel, the medium between God and His human messengers), Mika-il (Michael, the angel of sustenance), Ezra-il (angel of death), Israfil (angel of the Trumpet), Radhwan (custodian of Paradise), Malek (custodian of the Hellfire), Raqeeb and 'Ateed (the angels who keep records for our good deeds and bad deeds), and Nakker, and Nakeer (the angels who question a human being briefly after death). A Mu'men is a person who believes that these angels exist and we are affected by them.

A Mu'men also believes that God revealed His guidance to humanity in previous Books before the Holy Qur'an. These included the Torah (Old Testament revealed to Moussa, Moses, pbuh), Zaboor (revealed to Prophet Dawood, David, pbuh), and the Engel (New Testament revealed to the Messiah, Essa Bin Mariam, Jesus Christ, the son of Mary, pbuh). These Books included the same message of guidance to humanity summarized in the Holy Qur'an. A Mu'men, further, has the same respect and love to the previous messengers of God, and should not differentiate one from the other, or side with one against the other.

A Mu'men believes that this life is a test, in which all our deeds and activities are recorded by angels. We will be held accountable for the entire test when we meet our Creator in the Day of Judgment. So, the belief in the Last Day is an acknowledgement of accountability and reckoning. It is an incentive for people to do good in this life in order to be rewarded in Paradise, and a warning against doing bad in order to avoid punishment in the Hellfire.

Finally, a Mu'men believes in Al-Qada wal Qadar, or divine destiny, both the good and the evil thereof. This is a belief in the ability of Allah, praise to him, to predict our behavior. (For a brief discussion about predestination, see: [Five Islamic Issues, predestination and choice, position toward other religions, angels, and the End of Days](#)).

I'hsan:

I'hsan is the highest of the three levels of faith and the closest to God. It is to worship Allah as if you are seeing Him. While you do not see Him, He truly sees you. Then, I'hsan means that a **Mu'hsen** is sure that Allah is seeing him/her in everything he/she says or does. Therefore, a Mu'hsen does his/her best to say and do only what pleases God and conforms to His commands. This is the level of righteousness, perfection, as well as doing and saying the ultimate good for the sake of goodness.

The word "I'hsan" in Arabic is a derivative of the verb "ahsana," which means doing things better. Thus the literal linguistic meaning of I'hsan is doing the best, which is doing what God commanded us to do (For more information about God's commands, see [Islamic Law, Shari'a, Part I, Prohibition, Don't Do, and Do Commands](#)).

Here are some verses from the Holy Quran, mentioning the words **I'hsan** and **Mu'hsen**, and conveying these meanings:

Indeed, Allah commands justice, **good conduct (I'hsan)**, and giving to relatives, (and He) forbids immorality, bad conduct, and oppression. He admonishes you that perhaps you will be reminded (Al-Na'hl, 16: 90).

And your Lord has decreed that you not worship except Him, and to parents, **good treatment** (Al-Issra, 17: 23)

Yes, whoever submits his face in Islam to Allah while being a **doer of good** will have his reward with his Lord. And no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve (Al-Baqara, 2: 112).

And spend in the way of Allah and do not throw (yourselves) with your (own) hands into destruction. And **do good**; indeed, Allah loves the **doers of good** (Al-Baqara, 2: 195).

So Allah rewarded them for what they said with gardens [in Paradise] beneath which rivers flow, wherein they abide eternally. And that is the reward of doers of good (Al-Ma-ida, 5: 85).

Notes:

This Hadith was originally translated by Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies (Abdul Wadoud), "An-Nawawi's Forty Hadiths." 1976. Dar Al-Manar. However, this author is solely responsible for the changes he made in the translation for purpose of more accuracy.

The 'Hadith is also part of the Sa'hih Muslim collection, which is typed with tashkeel (with vowels) at the:

<http://hadith.al-islam.com/Loader.aspx?pageid=194&BookID=25>

The apostrophe used in 'Hadith, I'hsan, and Mu'hsen, refers to an Arabic glottal sound, not found in English.

1 Omar Bin Al-Khattab, the Second Caliph.

2. Zakat is often referring to alms-tax or poor due, it is a tax levied on a man's wealth and distributed among the poor.

3. The House refers to the Ka'aba and the Holy Mosque in Makkah.

4. Iman generally refers to religious belief or faith. However, being a fundamental term in Islam, the Arabic word has been retained.

5. In this context, the word I'hsan has a special religious significance and any single rendering of it would be inadequate. Dictionary meaning for I'hsan includes right actions, goodness, charity, sincerity, and the like. The root also means to master or be proficient at, and it is to be found in this meaning in Nawawi's Hadith Number 17.

6. i.e. of the Day of Judgment.

7. This phrase has more than one interpretation. Among those given by An-Nawawi in his commentary is that slave girls will give birth to sons and daughters who will become free and so be masters of those who bore them. Thus, it can be interpreted as a prophecy about an end to slavery.

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